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ABSTRACT

An examination of case studies suggests that rational processes were not entirely at work in the planning and conception of new, innovative schools. The rational model that serves as the foundation of our information systems assumes that a compelling professional need triggers a search for solutions; and, therefore, school personnel are eager to utilize whatever information lies at hand to help them select and implement the best solution. An alternative model is suggested, one that is based on the idea that knowledge utilization serves certain social and psychological (nonrational) functions that have rarely been considered. Thus, in addition to the task-oriented functions, that are geared to improving practice, there are a host of symbolic functions that serve to enhance the legitimacy, the prestige, or the morale of groups and individuals engaged in educational practice. These include legitimation of current plans or practices, cooling-out of critics, justification for failure (for instance, research on the learning disabilities of minority children), status conferral, ego enhancement, and so forth. Further, it is suggested that certain of these symbolic functions are best served by local information seeking and utilization. (Author/IRT)

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KNOWLEDGE UTILIZATION STRATEGIES IN THE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF NEW SCHOOLS — SYMBOLIC FUNCTIONS

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Knowledge Utilization Strategies in the Design
and Implementation of New Schools — Symbolic Functions

A surprising aspect of our research on the planning and implementation of innovative new schools is that little sustained effort was made to employ information or technical assistance from external sources. One would suppose that the design and operation of innovative settings would afford both opportunity and pressure for utilization of outside expertise. Our observations, however, suggest that innovative new schools are no more prone to seek outside help than those which have existed for some time. District or county staff are prime sources of information and new ideas, with an occasional contact with the state education agency; systematic search of the literature on proposed structures and programs is not pursued; and referral to information retrieval centers (even when one is present in the area) does not occur. Indeed, the planners of the new schools tended to reject our offer of "human systems" consultants on a matching funds basis. As Miles asserts in a progress report on our research, "We repeatedly found...that using the sort of generalist consultant we had in our pool of nineteen seemed to be relatively beyond the ken of all but our more sophisticated planners... It may well be that our entry would have been easier and simpler had we promised nothing but a research presence with occasional reports."

The tendency to utilize local personnel was especially marked in two of the settings. In the case of Brander Matthew [redacted] school (all names are fictitious), only local and county people were involved in an elaborate feasibility study which produced six separate reports; and three of these reports

were summaries of past recommendations and findings of local and state agencies regarding the needs of emotionally handicapped children, for whom the school was being planned. At one point a local university person was hired to design and help implement a community survey; but this was a purely technical form of assistance with little bearing on the substance of plans. Further, a single journal source was used for the framework of the program: a hierarchical model which had appeared in Exceptional Children about thirteen years earlier. And not only were references to up-to-date sources conspicuously absent, but the planners were aware that the idea of a separate facility for the emotionally handicapped went against the grain of professional opinion at large, which held that such children should be dealt with in the normal classroom structure with special assistance as needed. Thus, the superintendent characterized the new school as "probably the most calculated risk venture that I've been involved with." In short, in the preliminary phases of needs assessment and adopting a solution, not only was expertise at large generally ignored, but it was occasionally spurned.

At a somewhat later stage, when it became necessary to gain support for a special facility in an already highly taxed community, consultants who shared the viewpoint of local planners were used to supplement their testimony before public bodies. But this was done only when local staff were not available for public meetings. As the case history asserts, "Under Superintendent Elseroad's leadership, expert knowledge available to him was also made available to the public in the

expectation that this practice would serve to increase their understanding of the problem and support of the solution."[1] And as the case history states elsewhere: "...consultants were not simply handed the job of designing or implementing a program and imposing their thinking on the staff. The Brander Matthew planning model is one of reliance primarily on system-internal resources." The main exceptions were visits made by the planners to three similar schools elsewhere in the country. Thus, even when outsiders were seriously consulted, they tended to be other school personnel.

An even more striking case of local self-help was observed in the Lincoln Heights school. This new setting was planned as an open space school with multi-age grouping and team teaching, and was necessitated by the construction of new homes in a semi-rural township. Here again it is clear that the educational ideas that served as the foundation for the program were derived from "the accumulated skills and knowledge of the township educational system," according to our case history.[2] The superintendent had already introduced a number of new programs into the district during his twelve years of tenure, including a group dynamics and organization training program for the staff. In fact, many staff members had attended training sessions at Bethel, Maine, and elsewhere.

When our project offered seed money for a consultant on planning of new schools, the response of the principal and his assistant was highly significant. As the case history states:

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[1] The case history of Brander Matthew school was prepared by Bunty Ketcham and Dale G. Lake, with the assistance of Susan Baron and Amanda Gauldin.

[2] The case history of Lincoln Heights elementary school was prepared by Barry Gold.

> The idea was discussed at some length with (the principal and his assistant), both of whom rejected the use of an outside consultant, claiming that the necessary resources, primarily organization development skills, were available in the district, and they wished to use (and strengthen) these internal resources. In their view, if they needed a consultant at all it would be for a short period and for a specific problem. Eventually, it was decided by mutual agreement between the Social Architecture project and the school that some of the money intended for consultants could be used instead to pay half the costs of the communications workshop.

The designers of the new setting were all local school personnel: the superintendent, an elementary school principal, and a group of teachers that was formed to present suggestions. In addition to the superintendent and principal, a leadership role was assumed by a teacher who was especially well versed in group dynamics and who conducted the "communications workshop." As a consequence of this activity, the search for external knowledge seems to have been further discouraged. The following report was made by our case study worker:

> The actual process of brainstorming is to have members throw out suggestions on the topic and a volunteer puts them on newsprint or a blackboard. Usually there is no critical discussion of the ideas but only suggestions on wording.
>
> This procedure does not permit systematic scanning for relevant pieces of knowledge, although various books are sometimes mentioned and may be brought in to school. The result of the brainstorming is a list drawn from faculty members' experience and anticipated problems and goals. The variety pool of ideas — options — is thus substantially limited.
>
> It seems that one intended benefit of this work procedure is that of creating a sense of "ownership" of the products. Ownership <u>is</u> created, in the sense that everyone has input, but there is no conflict or fighting over ideas, which if constructive would create considerably more investment in the product.
>
> Thus the cost of the brainstorming procedure may be that its results fall into the same mold that the teachers came out of.

The effect of both selective recruitment and the group dynamics emphasis can be seen in the importance attached to staff relationships as a desirable aspect of the school. When asked in a questionnaire, "As briefly as possible describe some of the aspects of being on the staff of the school that you are looking forward to," of the eleven who answered, all mentioned some feature of the staff, such as the opportunity to work with the principal or to work in teams. In contrast, only five mentioned improved learning opportunites for students. The lack of concrete organizational ideas was revealed in response to another question in a later survey after the school had opened. When asked if they had had some idea for "an innovative or new educational practice which you believe would improve the working of your school (beyond your own classroom)," only three out of twenty respondents replied in the affirmative. And when asked to indicate the source of the idea, only one mentioned a source outside of the district. The principal, for example, cited as a source of his idea "my own professional experience and observation."

The school staff was shaken out of its preoccupation with internal group processes when the community began to attack the idea of open space education. What many parents wanted was at least one self-contained classroom for each grade level. The school staff, in turn, felt that parents were totally ignorant of the issues and of the educational philosophy of the new school, and berated the school board for failing to support them. As the school-community conflict grew in

intensity, compromises were made in the plan for the school and decisions enforced in a manner that thoroughly demoralized the staff. As the case history states:

> As the resistance of the community to the philosophy and technology of the school increased, (the principal) seemed to feel that some unanticipated and consequently unpopular decisions had to be made rapidly. Thus the carefully cultivated, easy-going democratic decision-making process and supportive atmosphere of the early stages shifted toward pseudo-democratic decision-making that seemed to undo some of the positive staff development work at the beginning of planning.

In the present case, then, the focus on internal group processes and local self-help not only diverted attention from external knowledge about educational programs, but subverted relationships with the community, leading eventually to demoralization and the loss of valuable planning time. As the case history points out:

> The preoccupation with community matters and the resulting uncertainty about the school's design slowed things up considerably. It is the feeling of many staff members that they will be lucky if by September they have their teaching spaces prepared to receive kids. Few expect to have the problems of team teaching solved or a curriculum planned. For example, Priscilla said that she often improvises in her teaching and she will start the school year off with a lot of on-the-spot-planning.

Not all the schools in our study have been quite as provincial as these two cases. It should be noted, however, that the two schools that were <u>most</u> prone to the utilization of outside assistance and ideas enjoyed rather special circumstances. In the one case the school was jointly sponsored by a municipal college and the school system of one of the largest cities in the nation, with college faculty as teachers. Thus, professors of education from throughout the municipal college

system were called upon to make state-of-the-art presentations to the planners. And in the other case of high knowledge utilization, the guiding spirit behind the plan for a special school for students with exceptional artistic talent was a highly energetic woman who was steeped in the innovation literature, thoroughly familiar with the alternative school movement, and a frequent participant in national conferences. In the absence of these special conditions of sponsorship or leadership, these schools also might have pursued a parochial strategy of knowledge utilization.

What needs to be explained is not the absence of knowledge utilization in the planning of these innovative schools, but the persistent emphasis on local resources. This finding is by no means exceptional, of course. Many studies of information use in education have observed a tendency to rely on local peers. In a recent survey of 352 districts of all sizes, Havelock[3] found an "almost total absence of mentions of outside resource groups" when asked about key factors in the successful or unsuccessful adoption of a major innovation effort in the district. When shown a checklist of resources, outsiders were mentioned much more frequently, of course; but still only about half as frequently as insiders.

The explanation usually given for the predominance of local resources is that they are readily accessible, easy to communicate one's problem to, and quick to respond. Thus, the designers of information retrieval systems have sought to approximate these features of informal relationships by

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[3] Havelock, Ronald G. "Resource Linkage in Innovative Educational Problem-Solving: Ideal vs. Actual," Journal of Research and Development in Education. Vol. 6, no. 4 (summer), 1973. p. 82.

means of personal linkage agents, revisions in cataloguing systems to suit the vocabulary of practitioners, and quicker turnaround. (Training in information search and retrieval is also advocated.) But it seems doubtful to us that this conventional explanation accounts for the local orientation of our new, innovative schools. For here we find a lengthy planning period, the existence of a substantial and readily accessible literature on alternative schools, and even the offer of carefully selected consultants. Also, in the first case discussed above the planners were aware of professional opinion regarding the education of emotionally handicapped children, but proceeded to adopt the opposite course by creating an expensive new facility. And in the second case, the emphasis on local self-help was not merely a reflection of individual tendencies, but an explicit philosophy of the school and district. Further, in all cases the founding of new schools is an expensive venture of considerable risk, which would cause one to anticipate a thorough search of the literature and use of technical assistance for help in formulating solutions to felt needs. In short, the rewards for use of external expertise, and the motivation for success, were quite high.

A clue to the fundamental weakness in the conventional explanation is that the solution of creating a new school of a certain kind was formulated prior to extensive knowledge seeking in all of our settings; and in the two cases we have discussed (in which extensive knowledge seeking never occurred), the solution appears to have been embraced even prior to studies of local needs. The special school for the emotionally

handicapped was conceived by a man whose own local diagnostic center was being closed, and who had been trained in the only treatment center for emotionally disturbed children in the country. Further, the size of the proposed center was determined by criteria that would qualify the school for a gymnasium and a library rather than by any consideration of the needs of emotionally disturbed children. Only after these decisions had been made were funds sought from ESEA for a feasibility study. In the case of the open space school, a needs assessment was apparently never conducted; and a survey of community attitudes towards the open space concept was conducted only several months after planning had commenced.

These observations suggest that rational processes were not entirely at work in the conception and planning of these new environments. The rational model which serves as the foundation of our information systems assumes that a compelling professional need triggers a search for solutions; and, therefore, school personnel are eager to utilize whatever information lies at hand to help them select and implement the <u>best</u> solution. Thus, the practitioner is viewed as a rational, information processor who is ready to assess evidence of need, weigh alternative solutions, and select the most practical and effective mode of action. Accordingly, whatever interferes with this rational process is passed off as a "constraint" on knowledge utilization.

We would like to suggest an alternative model, one which is based on the idea that knowledge utilization serves certain social and psychological (non-rational) functions which have rarely been considered. Thus,

in addition to the task-oriented functions, which are geared to improving practice, there are a host of symbolic functions which serve to enhance the legitimacy, the prestige, or the morale of groups and individuals engaged in educational practice. These include legitimation of current plans or practices, cooling out of critics, justification for failure (e.g., research on the learning disabilities of minority children), status conferral, ego enhancement, and so forth. Further, we suggest that certain of these symbolic functions are best served by local information seeking and utilization.

In a society which places a premium on fact gathering, rational planning, and the possession of expertise, it would not be surprising if knowledge utilization served a variety of symbolic functions. And in a profession which lacks a solid body of technical information, these functions might become even more important than task-oriented functions. This would explain the pseudo-technical jargon and the host of faddish innovations found in education. Frequent references to "research" without any clear idea of what the term means is a sure sign of a need to legitimate doubtful practices. And since new schools are especially risky ventures, it is entirely possible that the legitimative function of knowledge utilization would take precedence over the purely task-oriented function. As noted in one of our case studies, outside experts were called in to testify before community groups long after the new school had been conceived by the staff.

An especially important function of local knowledge utilization is the integrative function. It is clear that the staff of the new schools wanted to take credit for the planning and operation of their own enterprise, as already noted at several points in our discussion, thereby giving them a sense of ownership. That this goal was occasionally pursued at the expense of using outside help is indisputable. With reference to a staff development institute set up by the school for the emotionally

handicapped, the coordinator pointed out: "I did feel that we had to use our own resources and if we became too dependent on university people we would never own it. We would never really be seen and our people wouldn't believe in themselves." In short, the need for external information was subordinated to the need for a sense of involvement and ownership.

In addition to this integrative function of relying on local resources, certain status-enhancement functions were also in evidence. Local persons who had some special knowledge or experience pertaining to the innovation gained prestige and authority in planning and operating the schools. The teacher who was familiar with human relations techniques in the open space school gained considerable status and even power as a result of his communications workshop; and the principal was selected from a long list of candidates mainly because of his familiarity with an open space school elsewhere. In the school for the emotionally handicapped, only one of the seven administrators had not been involved in the lengthy planning process as chairmen of committees, directors of special studies, or coordinators of planning. These experiences had given them the opportunity to develop a certain amount of expertise in distinct aspects of the school program. In sharp contrast to this pattern of status-enhancement in the two schools that were most committed to local resources is the case of the arts school, which quite actively sought external assistance. The woman who was responsible for the development of this school did not aspire to an administrative position for the simple reason that she was officially located in an inter-district service agency. Thus, her willingness to use outsiders might have stemmed from the fact that her career was outside of any particular school or district. Similarly, with regard to the school sponsored by the municipal college, the college faculty of the proposed school had careers outside of the school.

It would be irresponsible to claim that the symbolic functions of local knowledge utilization are more important than the task-oriented functions at all phases of organizational development. Also, it is by no means clear that local resource use is detrimental. Since a certain amount of personal, organizational, and professional security is a prerequisite for effective role performance, the social integration afforded by local problem-solving efforts might help the organization to achieve its ultimate goals. These issues will be pursued as our research proceeds. What is clear, however, is that designers of information systems must somehow take into account the heavy emphasis on local resources regardless of the availability of streamlined retrieval services. Further, they must do so without succumbing totally to the demand for "home grown" practices and parochial problem-solving. Indeed, it is possible that certain types of staff development that are widely advocated, such as OD training with its heavy emphasis on group process, raises esprit de corps at the expense of knowledge utilization. In other words, a possible product of strong group identity might be a sense of self-sufficiency that impairs fruitful relationships with the environment. Thus, not only is substance lacking in approaches like OD, but it might be positively spurned as a consequence — at least in the form of external resources based on disciplined inquiry and development.

What might be required are new linkage roles within local settings that provide access to centralized retrieval agencies and that employ group process skills as well as information skills.[4] Instead of bringing

[4] For an elaboration of the need for full-time, free floating generalists in local districts, see my paper "Structure versus Function in Models of Educational Change" (forthcoming publication).

experts to the district, expertise might have to be imported in the form of materials that are directly relevant to the expressed needs of groups or individuals. By bringing such materials to the attention of educators and helping them to select and implement what they desire, the threat of preemption of local status rewards might be alleviated. Also, integration of the planning group will not be threatened by ties of dependency to outside experts or organizations.

In conclusion, cosmopolitan disseminators and local problem-solvers cannot live without each other, but they also cannot live together — at least within presentday conceptual and administrative frameworks of educational R&D.